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Leadership for Higher Education – Role of a Dean

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Academic Leadership Journal

The role of the academic dean is often a difficult one to describe. As a leader in higher education the dean has various responsibilities and many challenges to face that tend to evolve with the ever-changing face of higher education. The role of the academic dean is one that is multifaceted, challenging and often ambiguous. (Walker, 2000) The dean is a person the students could go to in times of trouble and in times of prosper, and to learn from the dean about life. It is essential that deans have the required knowledge base, skills and abilities to perform effectively in this demanding role.

Degradation of the Chair

Due to privatization of higher education in India, there has been a mushrooming of sub standard schools throughout the country. The number of dental professionals in India has increased from 60,000 to 1,25,000 and is projected to be more than 2,00,000 in the next five years. Every year more than 25,000 dental graduates are added to this list. The number of dental institutions has also correspondingly increased from 120 to 310 in the past ten years (Sivapathasundharam, 2007). India has the highest number of dental institutions in the world. Similar mushrooming is seen in medical and nursing schools. In a study by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council reveals that 90 per cent of the colleges and 70 per cent of the universities graded by the council in India are or “middling or poor quality”. (NAAC, 2009) An overwhelming majority of them have to make do with mediocre faculty and poor infrastructure, such as laboratories or libraries. The system lacks incentives to perform; there is no reward for the meritorious and no way to ease out the non-performers. The quality of teaching and research cannot be evaluated because there is no accountability. The reason for these changes apart from the corruption in the education sector is also attributable to the degrading of position of dean. The respectable position of dean in most of the private Indian schools instead of acting as a leader has reduced merely to a puppet in the hands of the management. They have been given no powers to maintain the standard or quality of education. From first hand experience, many of the deans in India instruct their faculty to pass all their students, whether they deserve or not. In some cases marks have been asked to be given on blank papers or for students who do not even appear for the exam. In the healthcare profession or any profession in India, one of the main reasons for mushrooming of sub standard schools and poor quality students is the dean. Even though the truth is known, it is hidden by him from the respective councils and thereby helping the offender. These types of activities bring about a feeling of resentment among the faculty and students and a loss of trust for the chair.

Liaison Officer

Deans are supposed to work with top-level administrators to help them support and understand top-level decisions. Administrators cannot know everything. Dean is the person in position and should inform top-level administrators when objectives are not being accomplished, or objectives need to be changed. As middle managers, deans have to draw upon skills and strategies in order to cope with the dissonance that may arise from having to satisfy both administration and faculty (Zimpher, 1995). Deans frequently are entangled in a web of competing agendas that require negotiation, courage, and risk taking (Gardner, 1992; Munitz, 1995).

The dean of students, whether in a college/university or a public school setting, is to serve as a liaison between students, the administration and the faculty. Academic deans of today have shifted a focus away from the student and move more towards administrative obligations with a focus on the faculty.

Change of Roles in Modern Era

While they still may have kept some of their humanist ideals of the past, the academic dean of today is viewed quite differently than in the past. Gould (1964) notes a thirty year progression of the roles of the dean as going from “almost sole concern with students, through a phase when students and curriculum were his largest responsibilities, to a period when curriculum and faculty demanded the greatest part of his energies, and finally to a place where his major concern is the faculty alone”. This change has been viewed as one of the reasons for the recently developing less cordial relations between faculty and the dean.

Dean’s duties have changed over time from being “almost exclusively student focused to include a multifaceted array of roles, such a budgeting and fundraising, personnel and work environment management, program oversight, and external public relations” (Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez and Nies, 2001) Expertise with budgetary matters is extremely important and experience in administration and supervisory skills are essential. It does not appear that the list of responsibilities for a dean is exhaustive, nor are these duties always very clear. The individual institution and the needs of those that are a part of the organization often dictate the scope and magnitude of these responsibilities.

There are six core knowledge areas that are essential for a dean. These include; (1) knowledge of the mission, philosophy, and history of the institution, (2) learner-centered orientation, (3) instructional leadership, (4) information and educational technologies, (5) assessment and accountability, and (6) administrative preparation (Bragg, 2002). All of these knowledge areas though cannot remain constant. They need to continue to evolve as an institution evolves. Changes within an institution can encompass not only the institution itself but also changes in faculty, staff, and the student body (Walker, 2000). The dean as a leader must be equipped to handle such changes.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is founded upon and encompasses the following five values: *honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility* (Center for Academic Integrity, 1998). Supporting and affirming these values is essential to promoting and maintaining a high level of academic integrity. Responsibility for academic integrity lies primarily with dean of the school. Each member of the academic community must stand accountable for his or her actions. As a result, a community develops in which students learn the responsibilities of citizenship and how to contribute honorably to their professions. If knowledge is to be gained and properly evaluated, it must be pursued under conditions free from dishonesty.

In the Indian scenario the students are being sold the degree, examination results are being manipulated and students having never attended the college are being awarded the degree. The quality of students being produced in schools is below satisfactory. Examination system of schools including medical, dental and other allied health professions has been traumatized in India. Examinations have become a formality. Postgraduate seats are being allotted in the private institutes

on basis of capitation; with assurance of the degree. Faculty have no say in exams; being dictated terms by the management. Concepts of quality, integrity, justice and fairness; the very basis and foundation for any profession, have long been forgotten in the Indian scenario, since the mushrooming of the private schools.

A violation of academic integrity is an act harmful to all students, faculty and, ultimately the future prospects of the school. In the current scenario in India, Dean should provide the *Academic Integrity Policy*, make recommendations to the management concerning proposed changes in the *Policy* and provide advice and information concerning the *Policy* to the general campus community. This requires courage and risk taking abilities; prerequisites and virtue for a good leader. Faculty members must recognize their responsibility to exemplify the values of academic integrity in their own conduct.

Guidance and Counseling

The main concerns with higher education are in the area of guidance counseling and advising of students in public and private institutions for higher education. In India, academic advising and counseling of students is mostly dictated not so much from the education or future prospects side but from the corporate service side. The schools will do anything to get there admissions complete. Such kind misguidance has harmful effects on individual's future prospects and success and constitutes a part of academic integrity violation.

Human Relation Skills, and Thirst for Knowledge

Deans should “possess democratic leadership, creative management, and finely tuned human relation skills” (Bragg, 2000). It is evident that deans need to be multi skilled as well as possess a plethora of knowledge in many areas. They would also be experts on topics as wide ranging as the parameters of free speech and academic freedom, as well as what constitutes teaching excellence and how to evaluate it .

Deans are expected to find solutions to the difficult and varied situations that arise each day. They need to keep current with the world of higher education and the changes that are occurring not only at their own institution but at other colleges and universities as well. Some of the best skills a college dean can possess are the constant thirst for knowledge, commitment to lifelong learning, and the courage to embrace change in the ever-evolving world of higher education.

Future Deans

College deans for the future should be the gatekeepers of standards. They need to be caring and concerned more about the students. Future deans need to have much more sophistication in the area of finance. Most deans don't have a business or finance background and that are at a disadvantage when work with the corporate officers. Deans come into their positions “underprepared to deal with strained fiscal resources. (Wolverton et al, 2001). Communication skills both with public speaking and writing should be improved.

The skills needed to effectively perform the various duties assigned to a college dean are not exhaustive and continue to change as the academic environment evolves. One commonality and necessity among all deans regardless of institution is the ability to be a leader. Maintenance of

academic integrity, lack of academic preparation and motivation among students, quality of students, and strained budgetary resources are main concerns of deans across institutions. Deans for the future must be prepared to deal with these situations as well as the changes that will continue to occur across campuses both within the institutional structure, as well as with the faculty and student.

Conclusion

Higher education in India is gasping for breath, at a time when India is aiming to be an important player in the emerging knowledge economy. The maladies and deficiencies in India's higher education system need urgently to be addressed by making it more professional and creative and less bureaucratic and political. The dean of a school plays a key role in the learning process, both in an academic and extracurricular capacity. It is obligatory and moral duty of the dean to maintain academic integrity and to promote a strategy for strengthening the quality of graduate and postdoctoral education across the schools.

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